

ABBÉ SICARD'S DEAF EDUCATION

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EMPOWERING THE MUTE, 1785-1820

Emmet Kennedy

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To my wife Jane Marie Kennedy
who lived through all of Sicard's lives

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My wife, to whom this volume is dedicated, hastened its completion by accompanying me to various libraries and archives, by sharpening every page of my prose, and by discovering serendipitously at the Paris Musée Carnavalet a contemporary *gouache* by J. B. Lesueur illustrating Sicard's rescue by the populace from the September Massacres of 1792. That painting marks Sicard's folkloric reputation as the "famous instructor of deaf-mutes."

E. K., Luray, Virginia, March 2015

INTRODUCTION

In 1794, during the Reign of Terror in France, the French government approved funding for the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets in Paris, under the directorship of abbé Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard (1742–1822). The first such institute in the world, it began the formal teaching of sign language on a state level according to the abbé's reformist vision.

Instruction for the deaf had previously been oral, informal, and tutorial in nature. France was the first country to emphasize a method that exclusively employed signing and therefore stood in opposition to the oral, or speaking, method that was used in Germany, Austria, and England. The French method prevailed in parts of Europe and the United States until the oralist method triumphed (by coercive means) after 1880. After a century, however, signing made a strong comeback and has for the most part remained the dominant approach in deaf education and communication.

The story recounted here is partly one of the scholastic rise of classroom instruction using grammars and dictionaries, the earliest of which were written by Sicard. It concerns the abbé's linguistic and grammatical innovations that began during his tenure at his first school in Bordeaux (where he was made principal in 1786) and continued until his death in 1822. He was appointed to important French and foreign academic seats (e.g., the Académie Française) and gave weekly public demonstrations of his students, attended by diverse audiences consisting of women intellectuals, German princes, and the royals of Britain and Europe.

Yet he aroused suspicion in the 1790s because of his religious non-conformity, his priestly status (which he never abandoned), and his reputed counterrevolutionary leanings. His unswerving orthodoxy as editor of the *Annales catholiques* from 1796–1799 was out of step with the times. Yet astonishingly, he managed to survive those turbulent years and elude the threats of massacre, the guillotine, and deportation.

What explains Sicard's anomalous survival? According to his students, he was indispensable to all of the successive governments that came to power, from the "absolute" and constitutional monarchies to the Jacobin Republic, the Napoleonic Empire, and the Bourbon Restoration. All of them supported and subsidized him as the nation's most celebrated educator of the deaf. His reputation as a scholar and pedagogue led to the perception that he was "too valuable to sacrifice," and the fact that his life was spared in 1793 belies the notorious words of a deputy of Robespierre's Convention: "The Republic has no need of Savants."

He possessed remarkable agility, talent, and luck (or what he invoked as "Providence"). He was, in effect, a clerical "*girouette*," a weather vane or (in the words of one Sorbonne historian) a chameleon. Did not Benjamin Constant say that hypocrisy was justified during the Terror?

This biography is neither a hagiographic work nor an attempt at demonization. Sicard was neither a saint nor an apostate, neither a genius nor a charlatan. Rather, he was a priest whose political acumen during France's Grande Révolution and whose talents as a grammarian of the new science of signs not only saved his skin but also brought him great fame. Other dissident priests encountered deportation, the Revolutionary Tribunal, or the Vendée firing squads. Still others more complicit with Revolutionary "dechristianization" abdicated their priesthood or abjured their faith. Hundreds of Catholic martyrs of the Revolution were beatified or canonized a century later. Sicard's path was perhaps less striking than that taken by Christian and Revolutionary martyrs: his was the path of a flawed, intriguing, and lucky survivor.

Education of the deaf was an example of Enlightenment *bienfaisance*, but its invention began with the sixteenth-century Spanish civil servant Ponce de Leon and the Benedictine monk Pablo Bonet, who wrote the first book of signs—as well as with a Jewish favorite of Louis XV, Jacob Péréire, who succeeded in teaching deaf boys to talk. Sicard belongs to a century of reform that preceded and survived the Revolution. The campaign to abolish slavery, torture, and cruel imprisonment was an objective of English, American, and French reformers from Bentham to Tocqueville. Sicard's philanthropy belonged to this tradition but was also ironic considering the atrocities of the Revolutionary decade that he experienced. Despite the prevalent acts of cruelty within society at large, humane treatment of the insane commenced formally in asylums opened by doctors, such as Philippe Pinel in Paris and Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia. Relief for the poor, conducted by

the National Committee on Mendicity and its chairman, the duc de La Rochefoucauld, characterized the era of the French and American Revolutions, which too belonged to “the age of reform.”

Knowledge itself was obviously a crucial component of enlightened reform. The abbé Condillac created a whole theory of knowledge that revised Locke’s sensationalism. Destutt de Tracy, during the Terror, initiated a multivolume system of “ideology” and “social science” designed to meet the challenges spawned by the Revolution. On the eve of the Revolution, Lavoisier, of the Academy of Sciences, systematically ordered random chemical elements; a few years earlier the Swede Linnaeus had classified plant life. Aspirations to reform the spoken languages of Europe resulted in the new subject of a “general grammar”—an attempt to find the common structures and roots of modern languages. More imaginatively, Denis Diderot wrote his *Letter on Deaf-Mutes from Birth for Those Who Hear and Speak* (1751), in which he stressed the superiority of gestures (or signs) to speech in expressing emotion in the arts, especially theater. Sign language possessed a utility that reached far beyond the tiny world of the deaf, and it became a priority during the French Revolution, satisfying the century’s quest for simplification. Like the metric system, it was a code that reduced complexity. Also, *sensibilité* on behalf of the speechless was an acutely felt cause in this age of conversation. The quest for a common denominator in philosophy (*sens commun*) and the democratic abolition of social orders also found expression in the search for a universal language that would unite humanity. Human rights would become truly universal, as Condorcet and Olympe de Gouges advocated, and would naturally include the deaf. As abolitionism strove to eliminate legal differences among races, so a universal language, which sign language was perceived to be, could potentially abolish the divisions of Babel.

Any discussion of abbé Sicard would be incomplete without reference to his predecessor and mentor, the abbé Charles-Michel de l’Épée, who founded the first school for the deaf more than thirty years before Sicard. The founder of French sign language, spent his own fortune to establish the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes. Sicard, by contrast, was in constant need of funds and even resorted to borrowing money from his favorite student. In his own defense, Sicard claimed that he was the victim of financial ineptitude rather than greed, and indeed, he was known to have often found himself in debt and at the mercy of financial manipulators. Another of the abbé’s known frailties was that he was unabashedly vain about his professional accomplishments. But should these flaws of character detract

from his linguistic and organizational contributions to the history of the deaf? A strong case for comparing Sicard favorably to his mentor, Epée, rests on his codification of grammatical signs and his dictionary of pantomimic gestures. These accomplishments did not survive the century intact, but they were somewhat original and certainly influenced the formation of French Sign Language and its offspring, American Sign Language. In the nineteenth century, Sicard's influence was striking in Russia, the British Isles, the United States, Spain, and beyond.

Enthusiasm for the deaf in every Revolutionary assembly satisfied the thirst to "right the wrongs of nature" with those captivating new signs, known best after 1789 by one man in Paris—the abbé Sicard.

The civil, religious, and social war that broke out in 1792 resulted in factionalism, emigration, and deportations that ultimately led to the coup by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. During the Napoleonic Empire, Sicard became a decided counterrevolutionary, which he had not been during the Revolution. Like many clerics, he was opposed to Napoleon and maintained frequent correspondence with the world of royalist espionage and counterrevolution. In 1809 he was arrested again by the Minister of Police, Joseph Fouché.

Free from harassment (by Revolutionaries, politicians, and the imperial police), the Bourbon Restoration became Sicard's intellectual and emotional home. Still head of the Institution des Sourds-Muets, he received continual visits from princes and literary notables from the old and new worlds.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHG	Archives départementales de la Haute Garonne
ADGironde	Archives départementales de la Gironde
AN	Archives Nationales
AP	<i>Archives Parlementaires, 1787–1860</i> , first series (1787–1799), ed. J. Mavidal and E. Laurent, 82 vols. (Paris, 1862–1913)
BHVP	Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris
CISMN	Sicard, <i>Cours d'instruction d'un sourd-muet de naissance</i> (Paris An VII)
INJS	Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris (Successor of Institution National des Sourds-Muets, 1794)
JdD	<i>Journal des débats</i>
LC	Manuscript Division, Library of Congress
PVCIPCN	<i>Procès-verbaux du Comité d'Instruction Publique de la Convention Nationale</i> (7 vols., Paris, 1891–1907, ed. James Guillaume)